

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

July 22, 2005

The Honorable Condoleezza Rice
Secretary of State
US Department of State
2201 C Street NW
Washington, DC 20520

Dear Secretary Rice:

We are writing regarding a matter of the greatest urgency – the fate of more than 400 Uzbek refugees in the Kyrgyz Republic who have escaped the repressive regime of Islam Karimov in Uzbekistan.

As you are no doubt aware, multiple witnesses have reported that on May 13, 2005, hundreds of residents of Andijon, Uzbekistan were murdered by Karimov's security forces. These residents had gathered peacefully to protest what they believed were the unfair convictions of local businessmen and to demand economic and social justice. The Uzbek government responded by reportedly shooting into crowds of unarmed civilians with no advance warning, in a slaughter reminiscent of the 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre.

Since then, the Karimov regime has prevented any credible, independent investigation into the violence and has attempted to prevent anyone from speaking about the incident. Karimov has claimed that the demonstrators were Muslim extremists and denies that his forces fired on unarmed civilians. The official death toll stands at 178, however, many observers report the numbers are hundreds higher.

After the crackdown, hundreds of Uzbeks fled Andijon across the border to Kyrgyzstan. Currently, more than 400 refugees are camped near Jalal-Abad. Since then Uzbekistan has pressured the Kyrgyz Republic to forcibly return the refugees. If that were to happen, many of them would certainly face persecution, torture and even death at the hands of Karimov's notorious security services. At least four refugees have already been returned, and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) has since learned that one was in a military hospital in critical condition.

The United States and other nations have indicated their willingness to accept refugees currently in Kyrgyzstan. However, the interview process can be lengthy and take weeks, if not months. The situation of the Uzbek refugees, however, is too urgent for such an extended process, for several reasons.

First, Kyrgyzstan has not stated whether the refugees will be allowed to stay long enough for other nations to interview refugees and determine their eligibility for asylum. The Kyrgyz Republic is itself in a transition, from an authoritarian regime to a democracy, and there is concern that the refugees' presence could destabilize the newly elected government. We urge the State Department to use all available diplomatic means to ensure that Kyrgyzstan will not forcibly return the refugees to Uzbekistan and will allow other nations access to refugees to conduct asylum interviews. Further, every effort should be made to encourage other nations

to accept these refugees, and to do so in an expedited manner. Obviously, we urge you to do everything possible to speed up the US process of admitting these refugees.

Second, the Associated Press reported this month that Uzbek security forces have been operating inside Kyrgyzstan, infiltrating the area surrounding the refugee camps to harass and intimidate the refugees. Their activities apparently include paying local residents to turn over refugees suspected of involvement in the events in Andijon, and seeking to incite ethnic violence between local Kyrgyz, local Uzbeks, and the Uzbek refugees. Such reports are troubling but credible, given the Uzbek regime's history of human rights violations and its demonstrated brutality against its own citizens. Given the millions of dollars in aid the US has given the Karimov regime, we expect the State Department to use the resulting leverage to pressure Uzbekistan not to harass the refugees in Kyrgyzstan (or their families in Uzbekistan) and to immediately cease pressuring Kyrgyzstan to return the refugees.

Finally, the refugees' living conditions in Kyrgyzstan are precarious, and Human Rights Watch has described the refugees' situation as "vulnerable." With winter approaching, the refugees will be forced brave the elements without proper shelter. We urge the State Department to work directly through the US Agency for International Development and indirectly through the UN, the Red Cross/Red Crescent, or other similar agencies, to ensure that refugees still in Kyrgyzstan when winter arrives will have the necessary shelter, clothing and food to survive.

Enclosed is a report that highlights some of the threats that the Uzbek refugees are facing. We request your help in ascertaining answers to the following questions:


- (1) What is the United States doing to ensure that the Uzbek refugees in the Kryrgyz Republic are not returned to Uzbekistan?
- (2) What is the United States doing to quickly relocate the Uzbek refugees to a new home?

We commend the State Department for its efforts to push for an independent international investigation into what happened in Andijon on May 13. The United States now has an opportunity to assist survivors of that massacre, and we urge you to do everything in your power to do so. We look forward to your prompt written response.

Sincerely,



William D. Delahunt



Lloyd Doggett

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Enclosure

Recent Eyewitness Report on Condition of Uzbekistan Refugees in Kyrgyzstan

I was at refugee camp recently. It was my first visit the camp and it was very exiting to see all these poor people, they are so lost and afraid to be sent back to Uzbekistan.

My impression was that Kyrgyz officials do not understand the situation well, they do not feel sorry at all about these people, and even try to use them to get some benefits from Uzbekistan and other countries.

The General Prosecutor of Kyrgyzstan, Beknazarov, in his last interview to the newspaper "Respublika" said that Russia and Kazakhstan are trying to convince Kyrgyzstan to hand refugees to Uzbekistan instead of getting from Russia some evidences against former president of Kyrgyzstan Akaev.

The life of these people is in danger. You know that Kyrgyz official handed 4 men to Uzbekistan already. One of them in the hospital, his name Tavakkal Khodzhiev, he was tortured almost to death, his relatives suspect that he was raped, and they torn all his nails out.

In the camp I heard that another man, Khasan Shakirov, was killed under torture already, his body was delivered home from the custody 4-5 days ago. I remember both of these guys.

At the moment in the custody in Osh, Kyrzystan are 29 men refugees, and they can be handed to Uzbekistan at any time. Uzbek authorities are doing everything to get these people, there is information that they are ready to pay any money, openly offer a bribe.

Representatives of UNHCR in Osh, Kyrgyzstan say that the immigration office of Kyrgyzstan has to consider all cases first of all, and then UNHCR can do consideration of a status of refugee for them. And these process can take months.

But Kazakhstan last week freed one human rights defender, Lutfullo Shamsuddinov, who is a refugee from Andijan, Kazakhs released him as they signed a Refugee convention of UN, as Kyrzzystan. Kazakhstan is not afraid of Uzbekistan.

If anyone is sent to Uzbekistan, they will be tortured to death and it is a threat of death penalty. You have to see them, it will be clear for you that they are nice people and they just escaped to save their life. Many of them simply could not get to their home at that day. One old woman tried with her son to get home and her 22 years old son was killed before her eyes.

One outside observer said that it is the cleanest refugee camp as he ever saw. Men work, cook there, woman sew and embroider. They are really normal people, who just decided to rise up against a dictatorship.

I think that these people, they are almost the only witnesses of the massacre, have to be send as soon as possible to third countries.

There was information that Uzbekistan is collecting troops on the border that they can attack the camp and take all refugees, UNHCR people were very worried, but it did not happen. But I think that Karimov can do even things like this.